

Improve Students Comprehension of Expository Text

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### **Introduction**

When children are learning to read, it is just as important for teachers to include expository text as narrative text. Expository text is written to provide factual information about a topic, such as a science or social studies textbook, non-fiction books and even the Internet. It is the opposite of a narrative, which is written to entertain. Learning how to read and comprehend information from text is important in order for students to be successful in school. In order to comprehend the text, students need to learn about the different ways expository text structures are organized. Therefore, by learning the various expository text structures, one can ensure the success of reading comprehension in students.

### **Problem**

One study revealed that first graders only spend an estimated time of 3.6 minutes a day on expository text (as cited in Moss, 2004). The more time spent on teaching the structure of expository text in the primary grades, the better the students will understand and remember the information. Children as young as first grade can comprehend expository text when they are directly taught the structure. As a result, teachers should incorporate direct instruction of the type of expository text being studied. According to Dymock (2005), many students struggle with their comprehension of expository text, mainly because they don't know how the information is organized (p. 177). Explicit teaching of signal words and the structure set up will help students organize the information presented. Once they are familiar with the organizational pattern, students are able to comprehend the information.

### **Expository Structures and Strategies**

Expository text has five different types of structure: description, sequence, comparison and contrast, cause and effect, and problem and solution. According to Moss, instruction should be taught in the order of: sequence and compare and contrast, description, cause and effect and problem and solution. The students should learn and understand each type before moving on to the next type (Moss, 2004 p. 713). An important thing to remember is the content of what is being taught. A child in the first grade would probably understand the sequence structure about the life cycle of a butterfly versus the sequence of the Great Depression.

#### **Teaching Signal Words**

An important factor in teaching the structure type is the signal words. The signal words give clues as to which type of text structure will be presented. For example, if the students are reading about the life cycle of a butterfly, the signal words could be: “*then, next, after* and/ or *finally*”(Moss, 2004, p.713). These signal words would be used because the structure of this text is sequence. Most of the expository text structures have their own set of signal words to aid in the comprehension of the information, although some authors may not use them. When there is no signal words to clue the reader it is even harder to grasp the information unless the type is well known to the reader. In this case, it is imperative that the teacher explains the structure of the text.

#### **Description**

The description structure is similar to the narrative with a main idea and supporting details. A topic is given and then information pertaining to that topic. An author could use this type of structure to inform about topics, such as animals or stars. Moss (2004) recommended that

description should be taught only after sequence and compare and contrast are fully understood by the students. She stated that there are no signal words for this type of structure (p. 713).

### **Student Strategies**

Two strategies Moss (2004) suggested students could use are a semantic map and a web, so that the student can see how the information is related to the main theme. She also recommended a retelling as a strategy for this structure. A retelling is where a student reads a good quality book then recalls as much information as possible. Some examples of quality trade books, which could be used for retellings and as an aid for introducing this type of structure, include the following: “*Bats* by Gail Gibbons, *Amazing Snakes* by Richard Parsons, and *Ant Cities* by Arthur Dorros” (p.713). Santoro, Chard, Howard and Baker (2008) suggested a KWL Chart; “What I *Know*, What I *Want To Know*, What I *Learned*” (p. 397). A strategy that Dymock (2005) recommended was a list, where information is written in a list form.

### **Teaching Strategies**

Santoro, et al. (2008) also suggested a read aloud, this is where a teacher reads a passage, and then asks the students to discuss a question that encourages them to think at a higher level. An additional type of a strategy that can be used for teaching a descriptive structure is a think aloud; this method involves talking about the text as it is read (Gillam, Fargo, and Robertson, 2009). These two types of strategies are similar to each other. The think aloud could be used for modeling the comprehension process. However, the read aloud is used to encourage students to make connections to the content. Both of these strategies are setting the stage for students to comprehend the text.

**Sequence Structure**

This type of expository structure provides information in a consecutive order and, according to Moss (2004), is easier for younger students to understand. An author writing about the life cycle of a butterfly would use this type of structure. The signal words include: “*first, second, third, then, next, last, before, after, and finally*” (p.713).

**Student Strategies**

A timeline could be another strategy to use for this structure. Dymock (2005) suggested using “The String Pattern”; this approach is where the arrows point to the next event in the order of occurrence (p. 179). Another strategy suggested by Moss (2004) is using quality trade books for retellings. The trade books she suggested using for this structure include: “*My Puppy is Born* by Joanna Cole, *How Kittens Grow* by Millicent Selsam, and *The Buck Stops Here* by Alice Provensen” (p. 713).

**Teaching Strategies**

Fisher, Frey, and Lapp (2008) stated that shared readings could be a strategy a teacher would use for modeling interaction with the texts; for example, while reading a text the teacher will be actively engaged by verbally making connections. This strategy was presented in a fifth grade setting and it was found to be successful in helping students understand the text structure (p. 548).

**Comparison and Contrast Structure**

The comparison and contrast type of expository structure involves gathering information that is similar and different between two or more topics. For instance, a class may be learning about the similarities and differences of birds that can fly and birds that cannot fly. The signal

words most common for compare and contrast structure include: “*same as, alike, similar to, resembles, compare to, different from, unlike, but, and yet*”. This text structure should be taught after the sequence expository text structure is learned by students (Moss, 2004 p.713).

### **Strategies**

Santoro et al (2008) suggested a read aloud and a KWL Chart. Fisher et al (2008) recommended using shared readings at a seventh grade level with this type of structure. The following trade books could be used for retellings: “*Fire, Fire* by Gail Gibbons, *Gator or Croc* by Allan Fowler, and *Outside and Inside You* by Sandra Markle”(Moss, 2004, p. 713). Another strategy for comprehending the comparison and contrast structure is the Venn diagram, which is the use of two overlapping circles. A Venn diagram is usually used at the third grade level. A strategy that could be used for a first grade level is the Matrix. The Matrix is similar to a chart where the topics are in one section and the information about them is arranged in columns. The matrix can be used for a first grade level, provided the teacher had the format of the matrix printed for the students and they would just fill in the information (Dymock, 2005). The type of strategy that a teacher would decide to use for comprehension of this structure would depend on the type of content that is being taught to the students and what grade level the students are at.

### **Cause and Effect Structure**

This type of expository structure presents a situation and then explains the results of the situation; some examples include environmental issues, such as an oil spill or the result of the bombing of Hiroshima. The age range of this type of structure depends on the topic, although Moss (2004) stressed teaching cause and effect after sequence and comparison and contrast are

already mastered by the students. The signal words for this type of structure are: “*if, so, so that, because of, as a result of, since, in order to, cause and effect*” (Moss, 2004, p.713).

### **Strategy**

The recommended trade books are: “*What Makes Day and Night?* by Franklyn Bramley, *What Happens to a Hamburger?* by Paul Showers and *How Do Apples Grow?* by Guilio Maestro” (p. 713). Teaching strategies for cause and effect structure can include a web, retellings (Moss 2004), read aloud and a KWL chart (Santoro et al, 2008 p. 397), and a think aloud (Gillam et al, 2008). A teacher could use one strategy or incorporate many to aid in the comprehension of the content. The type of strategy a teacher chooses could depend on the level of the students and how complex the type of information is.

### **Problem and Solution Structure**

The problem and solution structure presents a dilemma to the reader, and then explains how it was resolved. One type of dilemma could include the topic of The Underground Railroad. Signal words to help the reader identify this type of structure are: “*problem, solution, because, cause, since, as a result, and so that*”. This structure type should be the last to teach; the students should know and understand the other types of structures already discussed (Moss, 2004, p.713).

### **Strategy**

Strategies that can be used to help with instruction could include: web, retellings (Moss 2004), read aloud, a KWL chart (Santoro et al, 2008), and a think aloud (Gillam et al, 2008). The following trade books could be used to aid in teaching the structure of a problem and solution text and they could also be used with the retellings: “*River Ran Wild: An Environmental History*

by Lynn Cherry, *Cars and How They Go* by Joanna Cole, and *If You Traveled on the Underground Railroad* by Ellen Levine” (Moss, 2004, p. 713).

### New Understandings

Teaching expository text structure is crucial for the success of students. This type of structure needs to be introduced as early as kindergarten, and practiced many times throughout the early grades. Many people think that by the time students are in middle school and their curriculum is focused more on expository text structure, they just start learning it. However, research has shown that this is not always true. Students need direct exposure to the different types of expository text structures so that they can understand how to read and organize the information. Making sure that the type of text structure is developmentally appropriate for the level of the students is crucial in the comprehension of the text. Explicit instruction on the organization of the expository text and the pertaining signal words are also vital for students’ success of comprehension. It is also important to teach students how to read the text structure when the signal words are not directly stated but are implied.

Type of Expository Structure	Definition	Signal Words	Recommended Trade Books	Strategies	Recommended Grade
Description	Gives a topic with information	None	<i>Bats</i> by Gail Gibbons, <i>Amazing Snakes</i> by Richard Parsons, and <i>Ant Cities</i> by Arthur Dorros	Semantic Map, Read Aloud, KWL Chart, Think Aloud, List, Retelling	First Grade and Older



Sequence	Provides information in consecutive order	<i>First, second, third, then, next, last, before, after, and finally</i>	<b><i>My Puppy is Born</i></b> by Joanna Cole, <b><i>How Kittens Grow</i></b> by Millicent Selsam, and <b><i>The Buck Stops Here</i></b> by Alice Provensen	The String, Timeline, Retelling	First Grade and Older
Comparison and Contrast	Involves gathering information that is similar and different between two or more topics	<i>Same as, alike, similar to, resembles, compared to, different from, unlike, but, and yet</i>	<b><i>Fire, Fire</i></b> by Gail Gibbons, <b><i>Gator or Croc</i></b> by Allen Fowler, and <b><i>Outside and Inside You</i></b> by Sandra Markle	Venn Diagram, KWL Chart, Retelling,	First Grade and Older
Cause and Effect	Presents a situation and explains the result of it	<i>If, as a result of, since, in order to, cause, and effect</i>	<b><i>What Makes Day and Night?</i></b> by Franklyn Bramley, <b><i>What Happens to a Hamburger?</i></b> by Paul Showers, and <b><i>How do Apples Grow?</i></b> by Guilio Maestro	Read Aloud, KWL Chart, Retellings. Web	Third Grade and Older
Problem and Solution	Presents a dilemma then explains how it was resolved	<i>problem, solution, because, cause, since, as a result, and so that</i>	<b><i>A River Ran Wild: An Environmental History</i></b> by Lynn Cherry, <b><i>Cars and How They Go</i></b> by Joanna Cole, and <b><i>If You Traveled on the Underground Railroad</i></b> by Ellen Levine	Read Aloud, KWL Chart, Retelling, Web	Third Grade and Older

(Modified from Moss, 2004, p. 713)

## References

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